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Dance Band

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Dance Band

By Claude W. Lowe

QUICKLY the darkness absorbed Murphy's flabby little figure, but his footsteps reverberated emptily down the corridor, ceasing abruptly as his office door slammed. Herb swore softly at himself. Well, that was that. He had been expecting it; he had deserved it. Ever since the Kid had gone back to school, he had let the band limp along with one sax, knowing that this was coming. Lord, what a mess! He should never have kept the Kid in the first place—not even after he had discovered what a player he was. Too young—not much over twenty, probably—and too restless, too ambitious. Well, young fellows were privileged to look toward the future. Herb didn't grudge them their dreams of education and position, didn't even grudge the Kid his athletic aspirations—but a dance band was no place for them. He should never have let him stay; keeping him had certainly landed them in a beautiful mess. . . . Monday night, Murphy had said. . . .

Morosely, he leaned against the heavy steel door opening into the Dungeon. What a dismal hole it was; how it deserved its name! The Dungeon. Cleverest subterranean restaurant in New York, declared its patrons. But they never saw it at dusk when the darkness was sucking the light out of the place through those tiny barred windows, leaving the severe brick walls ominously black and bringing the futile little windows into tormenting prominence. It was a true prison then, damp and cold.

A LITTLE CHILL ran through Herb as he stepped down the cement stairs into the oppressive room; and, trying to shrug off his uneasiness, he headed diagonally across the dance floor.

"Hello, Herb."

He whirled about. Someone was sitting right across the table from him.

"Well?" came softly out of the darkness.

Quickly Herb snapped the lamp on, and the soft glow pushed the darkness back a little bit from the table.

"Surprise you?" The Kid grinned sardonically.

"Why, damn your hide; you nearly—look at the way I'm trembling. What the devil's the idea, anyway?"

"This was the scene where the villain enters. Pretty dramatic, I thought."

"You damned smart aleck. You —." Herb fumbled helplessly for something to cover up his relief. "You —. You've added more white hair, tonight —. Why, I ought to throw you out on your neck."

"Yes?"

"You're darned right. Did you hear Murphy out there? Listen, Kid, if some other outfit is playing here next Tuesday night, you'd better make out your will. If any of the boys in the band see you, you're a dead man."

"What do you mean? What have I done?"

"Just this: I haven't found a man yet who can take your place, and unless I have one by Monday night, out we go."

"I always said that you'd appreciate me some day."

"Shut up. I should smack you. First you quit the band to go back to school, and leave us in a swell pickle; then you come back and scare me so that I'll never be the same again. And laugh. The first wasn't bad enough by itself, so you had to come back—say, just why *did* you come back?"

"Why not? After working here three months, the place kind of gets under your skin." A crooked little smile played on Lampion's lips. "What would you give me to come back?"

"LISTEN, KID, if you're trying—say, you're not in earnest, are you?"

"What would *you* say?"

"Last time, you left us."

"But if I'd stay?"

"Why, I'll give you the same as before. No, ten a month more."

"O. K."

"Are you serious? Will you really come back, or are you—."

"I'm serious enough." The smile faded. "Why shouldn't I come back?"

"You should. You should. But I thought that you were so sold on a college education that nothing could break you down."

"There was certainly no harm in trying."

Herb glanced quickly at Lampson, but the boy seemed unaware that he had spoken; he was playing vacantly with the chain on the lamp.

"Gee, Kid, I hope you didn't let anything the boys said influence you. Never take them too seriously —."

"I didn't." Absorbedly he toyed with the lamp chain.

"Well, anyway, it was a break for me. Will you play to-night?"

"Oh, yes," he agreed carelessly.

Herb looked around for Lampson's instrument; it must be—there. No. Good Lord, what was that? Not a shoe? Sticking out from the ring of shadow under the table, a huge black—it was a shoe! An ugly, misshaped shoe! Herb glanced sharply at Lampson.

"Kid, what the devil's the matter?" he demanded.

"Nothing." But his lips curled as he said it, and then his face resumed its former grimness as he harried the chain.

"I mean your—"

QUICKLY the boy looked up at the older man. His eyes flickered down to the foot, and rose again challengingly to Herb's foot. "Well, what of it?"

"Good Lord! How did it—?"

"Does that make any difference?"

"No, but—" Lampson's eyes dropped back to the swinging lamp chain. "So that's the reason? I thought you wouldn't leave school without a reason. You're a fool to let that ruin your future." The Kid grinned derisively at the table cloth. "Laugh, you idiot. I know what you'd been planning. I know what you're giving up just because of —"

"No!"

"Yes! You're afraid to go back. A coward!"

"No!" The Kid spoke coldly, decisively.

"It's your athletics then. I knew you were a track fiend, but I never imagined you'd be crazy enough to let the loss of track blight your whole life. Just how important do you think track

is in the world today? What will your track ability count in —”

“Shut up! If you say that word again I’ll kill you.” The shadow of the lamp chain swept viciously across the white table cloth.

“You fool, don’t —”

“Do you want me to play or don’t you?”

“Listen, Kid —”

“Do you or don’t you?”

“Of course I do, but —.”

Lampson was on his feet and swinging along on crutches toward the dressing rooms, his left foot turned clumsily inward, sweeping the floor at every step. The steel door clanged shut behind him; the room was suddenly silent. Nothing moved except the pendant on the lamp chain traveling a little elliptical orbit.

“**W**HAT A CLEVER PLACE,” the ladies gasped delightedly.

“Slickest in New York,” responded their escorts. “Nice band, too. Shall we dance?”

Waiters dressed in prison garb darted efficiently in and out under the low sprawling archways. The barred windows were illuminated artificially, now, from the inside. A swirling mass of blue shadows from the lights beneath the glass dance floor twisted and melted in and out of one another in rhythm with a muted trumpet.

A nice crowd, Herb decided, as he guided the boys into another number. A few minutes before, Murphy had looked in, nodded to him, and smiled; the whole world seemed to be all right except —. Who was that girl in yellow? He wished that the kid would stop watching her.

He remembered suddenly that they were playing one of Lampson’s old numbers from which the solo had been cut; he nodded to the Kid and signalled the electrician. The lights under the floor faded, and shadows of the dancers thrown on the walls by a multitude of table lamps were more fantastic than ever.

A pale blue spot caught the Kid as he swung onto the middle of the stage. The girl in yellow nodded briefly while dancing by as he swept the melody away from the trumpets with a stream of golden music that was at once everywhere, yet so elusive as to be nowhere. The round, full notes flowed forth effortlessly from

nothing, racing to new heights, sliding to new depths, always gracefully, rhythmically. He was not playing; his fingers strayed too meaninglessly over the keys. The music came from without him. Herb found himself under its enchantment, but he was not watching the player. He was watching the girl in yellow—and wondering.



Flight

By Rosemae Johnson

I HAVE an hour to dream in,
 An hour to look at the sky,
 An hour to swing into swift, singing space,
 To be joyously lonely, and I
 Shall coast on white sails through the blue
 Up above, with the blue up above me still.
 I shall ride on a cloud through white tempests
 Of clouds. I shall reach to the sunset and fill
 Every round ringing moment with transparent gold,
 Every short mile with wind-hastened flight.
 Every ray of the sun shall store ages of sun
 In my soul. I shall never know night.

I Am a Sandburg--

By Bruce Armstrong

I AM a Sandburg
 I write poetry
 I write free poetry, very free poetry, yea, even free
 verse
 I don't charge anything for it, in fact
 I don't believe it's worth anything, and
 I can't make poetry steal in on cats' paws.
 I believe I had better stop writing poetry, really
 I would make a much better fish peddler
 —Fresh fish!

